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SUBJECT: GOI PERSPECTIVES ON NEIGHBORS' CONFERENCE

Classified By: Deputy Chief Mission Daniel Speckhard for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Subsequent to his April 1 discussion with the Foreign Minister (septel), the DCM engaged a number of GoI officials on the neighbors' conference. Continued skepticism of the potential gains of the conference, and fears of outside intervention, leave many in the GoI lukewarm about the event -- particularly if not hosted in Iraq or a "neutral" location. Shia leaders in Najaf are not necessarily against the conference, according to the PM's Chief of Staff, but are not encouraged by it either. The DCM stressed the opportunity for the GoI to seek increased regional support by engaging diplomatically in the neighbors plus event. End summary.

¶2. (C) On the afternoon of April 1, FM Zebari had reminded the DCM that the PM's office harbored deep suspicion of the intentions of Iraq's neighbors, dampening GoI enthusiasm for a neighbors' conference that it could not fully control as host. Zebari noted potential "Najaf" concerns in the background of GoI thinking. The DCM spoke with PM Chief of Staff Tariq Abdullah later on April 1 to seek clarification of the current GoI position. Abdullah said he saw no strong arguments against the conference, and suggested that Najaf would have made its voice heard more clearly if it were indeed against the idea; "we would have heard." He said Najaf interlocutors had been briefed in advance of the March 10 neighbors' meeting in Baghdad and had raised no objections. Sistani generally did not interfere in such matters unless he saw an overarching concern critical to Iraq's future, said Abdullah. (Sistani had not objected to PM Maliki meeting POTUS in Jordan, for example, in spite of much opposition within the Shia community.) Abdullah said he was "pleasantly surprised" that Sistani did not intervene more often, and was in fact "very flexible and modern" in his approach. Sistani was not happy with Iran's role in Iraq, he added, contrary to what some might assume. Abdullah concluded that rumors of an anti-conference bias in Najaf seem unfounded.

¶3. (C) Nonetheless, the PM is worried that Arab countries are unsupportive of Iraq and are in fact undermining Maliki's efforts. Abdullah said that Syria is negative, Saudi Arabia supports militants, Egypt does "not make life easy," Iran interferes, and Turkey and Jordan have their own agendas. This, cumulatively, worries the PM about neighbors' intentions. He said a delegation sent to Egypt to pave the way for a potential Maliki visit got turned away at the airport. Gulf states "open doors to armed militants," he lamented, citing "confirmed reports" of UAE funding for "militant groups in the south."

¶4. (C) The GoI continues to look for support from the Gulf and will reciprocate in kind when support was offered, according to Abdullah. The GoI felt it had actively courted Saudi support in particular, yet remained convinced that Riyadh was fearful of a democratic and open political system on its border. Saudi Arabia may cite Iran as its primary

concern, he said, but the real fear of that authoritarian society (where Abdullah lived for five years and recalls being watched very closely) is the type of political system Iraq is trying to achieve. The PM was therefore concerned that any conference that he could not carefully control would feed other countries' desires to "create a mandate over Iraq" and undermine GoI legitimacy. Abdullah added that the conference offered a chance for the U.S. to talk to Iran, but felt bilateral discussions could be "more productive."

15. (C) The DCM also spoke briefly with other officials with close ties to Najaf or the PM confidants, including Finance Minister Bayan Jabr, CoR member Sami al-Askari, National Security Advisor Muwafaq al-Rubai, and Oil Minister Hussein Shahrastani, to encourage each to send the message that the conference is an important opportunity for the GoI. Careful preparation could nudge regional dynamics in the GoI's favor and Iraq could seek greater support at the ministerial level; a well-run conference could thereby reinforce the GoI position rather than undermine it. The DCM noted that the conference also offered the U.S. an opportunity to engage with all the neighbors in a multilateral setting. The DCM's interlocutors took these points on board and promised to relay the message favorably.

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